

# Honduras

## *Events of 2023*

Honduras' Military Police of Public Order stand guard on June 26, 2023, at one of the entrances to Tamara women's prison. At least 46 women were killed in the prison on June 20, 2023; in response, President Xiomara Castro's administration put all prisons under military control.

© 2023 Reuters/Fredy Rodriguez



President Xiomara Castro has largely failed to deliver on her promise to strengthen human rights and democratic institutions in Honduras.

Honduras continues to face longstanding structural challenges, including systemic corruption, political interference in the justice system, insecurity, a very large percentage of the population living in poverty, and lethal attacks against environmental defenders.

In February, Congress appointed a new Supreme Court. The 15 justices were selected from a list prepared by a committee based on merit, but legislators split vacancies among political parties, as in the past. As of October, selection of a new attorney general was delayed in Congress as parties fought to appoint a person friendly to their interests.

Also as of October, the government continued to negotiate with the United Nations secretary-general to establish a UN-backed international commission against corruption and

## Judicial Independence and the Fight against Corruption

The 15 Supreme Court justices appointed by Congress in February will serve for a seven-year period. Legislators retained the partisan practice of allocating selections proportionally among political parties, but this time, they selected from a list prepared by a nominating committee and based on merit, which was an improvement. Legislators also complied with Honduras' legal gender parity requirement and selected the country's first Afro-Honduran justice.

The government and the UN secretary-general are negotiating the establishment of an international commission against corruption and impunity, pursuant to a memorandum signed in December 2022. Between July and October, a group of UN experts visited Honduras three times to assess the viability and legal framework of such a commission.

In July, Congress abrogated Decree 57-2020, which had hampered prosecutors seeking to obtain key documentation in corruption investigations, and modified Decree 93-2021, an obstacle to money laundering prosecutions. In August, Congress abrogated Decree 116-2019, which had effectively barred the Attorney General's Office from investigating the misuse of public funds by legislators for up to seven years, pending an administrative audit.

Gabriela Castellanos, director of the Consejo Nacional Anticorrupción, an independent organization mandated by law in 2005 to fight corruption, left Honduras in June, having received threats after publishing a report on nepotism in the government. Castellanos returned after a month and continued her work denouncing corrupt practices.

Óscar Chinchilla was appointed attorney general in 2018 in violation of a constitutional provision that mandates that the attorney general be selected from a list prepared by a nominating committee. Chinchilla's term ended on August 31, 2023, and a nominating committee selected five candidates to replace him in a process that some civil society organizations said was influenced by political interests. Political jockeying continued in Congress, which, as of October, had not agreed on a new attorney general.

## Attacks on Human Rights Defenders

From January through August, 236 human rights defenders were harassed, threatened, or attacked, and at least 13 were killed—compared to 11 killed in all of 2022—the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Honduras reported. Seventy-five

In January, environmental defenders Jairo Bonilla and Aly Domínguez were killed in Guapinol, Colón department. Previously, they had received threats aimed at stopping their activities in defense of the Guapinol and San Pedro rivers. In June, Oquelí Domínguez, Aly's brother and also an environmental defender, was shot dead in Guapinol.

The mechanism Honduras created in 2015 to protect journalists, human rights defenders, and justice officials has serious flaws: It lacks financial autonomy, qualified staff experienced in human rights issues, and trust from defenders, who are afraid to provide personal information that could end up in the hands of those who threaten them.

## Economic and Social Rights

Nearly 80 percent of rural Hondurans lived in poverty, having income below US\$7 per day. Almost all of them lived in extreme poverty, making less than US\$4 per day, according to the latest official data, which is from 2021.

As of March 2023, official data showed 14 percent of Hondurans could not read or write, with the rate reaching 31 percent for those aged 60 and older. Only 56 percent of children between 12 and 14, and 29 percent between 15 and 17, were attending school.

Official data from March 2023 also showed that remittances were almost 8 percent of Hondurans' total source of income. Remittances amount to 27 percent of GDP, the highest rate in Latin America and the Caribbean, according to 2022 World Bank data.

## Public Security and Prison Conditions

Honduras is one of the most violent countries in the world, with police reporting 3,661 murders in 2022, a homicide rate of 38 per 100,000 people. According to Insight Crime, a think tank and media organization that reports on crime and security, Honduras has the second highest homicide rate in Latin America and the Caribbean after Jamaica. Preliminary police data shows 2,341 murders from January through September 2023, a 16 percent drop over the same period of 2022.

In December 2022, President Castro declared an ongoing state of emergency in several parts of the country, including the capital district, suspending the rights to freedom of association and assembly and to be informed of the reason for arrest, among others. OHCHR in Honduras expressed concern about the extended use of the emergency without a

In June, gang violence erupted in a women's prison, resulting in at least 46 deaths. In response, the Castro administration put prisons under military control, a common measure in Honduras that yields no clear results and appears to heighten rights abuses.

As of September, prisons held almost 19,000 detainees, which is 72 percent more than their capacity. Almost half were in pretrial detention, official statistics show.

## Women's and Girls' Rights

Based on 2021 data from the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Honduras has the highest rate of femicide—defined as “the killing of a woman by a man in the context of unequal power relations between men and women”—in Latin America. The Centro de Derechos de Mujeres, a Honduran nongovernmental organization (NGO) that monitors media, counted 317 femicides from January through September 2023.

Abortion is illegal in Honduras under all circumstances, with prison sentences of up to six years for people who have or perform abortions. In March, the newly appointed Supreme Court justices confirmed a previous ruling rejecting the argument that the ban is unconstitutional.

In March, Congress approved a law mandating comprehensive sexual education to help prevent teenage pregnancies. After fierce backlash from conservative groups, President Castro announced in July that she had vetoed the law.

In March, Castro signed an executive order ending a ban on the sale and use of emergency contraception.

## Migration, Asylum, and Internal Displacement

From January through September, Mexico's refugee agency reported 31,055 Hondurans had requested asylum there, second only to Haitians. Many continue on to the United States. Migrants face serious risks—including kidnapping, robbery, and discrimination—throughout their journey.

From January through July, 32,727 Hondurans—12 percent of whom were children—were forcibly returned, the government reported. More than half were from the US, and more than one-third from Mexico.

of 2022. More than 45 percent of them were Venezuelans, followed by Cubans, Ecuadorians, and Haitians, each representing more than 10 percent.

In March, President Castro signed a law to boost government help for communities and individual victims of internal displacement. Gang violence and human rights violations caused the internal displacement of about 191,000 people between 2004 and 2018, the latest official data shows.

## Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in Honduras continue to suffer high levels of violence and discrimination in all areas of life, forcing some to flee the country. Catrachas, a Honduran organization that monitors media reports, registered 40 homophobic or transphobic killings from January through October 2023.

Honduras has failed to comply with key measures ordered by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2021 in response to the killing of Vicky Hernández, a transgender woman, during the 2009 military coup. Among other requirements, the ruling ordered the creation of a protocol for criminal investigations in cases motivated by anti-LGBT bias and a procedure through which trans people could change their name and gender on official documents to reflect their gender identity. No such protocol or procedure had been established as of October.

## Disability Rights

Deficiencies in public infrastructure, difficulties in accessing employment, mistreatment in public transportation services, and poor access to information are part of the barriers people with disabilities face in Honduras, according to a 2022 ombudsperson report, which estimates that 14 percent of Hondurans have some type of physical, sensory, intellectual, or psychosocial disability.

## Key International Actors

In March, Honduras broke diplomatic relations with Taiwan and supported the “One China” policy, which holds that Taiwan is an inalienable part of the People’s Republic of China. Honduras and China agreed that Honduras would participate in the Belt and Road Initiative, a trillion-dollar project to spur China’s investment and advance its foreign policy interests.

mandate of a group of UN experts investigating systematic rights violations in Nicaragua and on renewing the mandates of the UN special rapporteurs on the human rights situation in Russia and in Belarus. It voted in favor of renewing the mandates of a group of UN experts investigating abuses in Syria and of the special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran, among others.